



Navigating Patriarchal Constraints: A Feminist Reading of Monika Bhatti's *Lives Not Lived*

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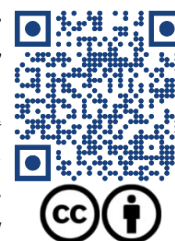
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Abstract— This paper offers a feminist analysis of Monika Bhatti's *Lives Not Lived*, focusing on the character of Naina to examine how patriarchal structures restrict female autonomy in contemporary Indian society. Situating the study within the broader trajectory of feminist thought, the paper draws upon theoretical frameworks proposed by Kate Millett, Sylvia Walby, Kamla Bhasin, and Nivedita Menon. It explores how patriarchy operates through ideological conditioning, social norms, and coercive practices that limit women's agency. The analysis highlights three major dimensions of control in Naina's life: the absence of autonomy in education and personal decisions, experiences of sexual and emotional exploitation, and the burden of gendered societal expectations. Through close textual reading, the study demonstrates how these mechanisms function collectively to discipline, regulate, and subjugate women. The paper further examines the psychological consequences of such systemic oppression, including trauma, alienation, and internalized self-blame. By foregrounding Naina's experiences, this study contributes to the limited scholarship on Bhatti's work and underscores the persistence of patriarchal power structures despite advances in feminist discourse.



Keywords—*Lives Not Lived*, autonomy, sexual politics, feminist theory, patriarchy.

I. INTRODUCTION

Society has witnessed four waves of feminism, each shaped by evolving priorities and ideologies. The first wave, emerging in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, focused on women's suffrage. The second wave, gaining momentum in the mid-20th century, addressed reproductive rights, bodily autonomy, workplace representation, and equal pay. The third wave, arising in the late 20th century, emphasized inclusivity and intersectionality, highlighting how gender intersects with race, class, and other identities. The ongoing fourth wave, beginning around 2007–2012, is defined by digital activism and movements like #MeToo, which combat systemic gender-based violence and inequality (Sternadori, 2019). These shifts have also influenced global and regional literary traditions, particularly feminist literature in the Indian subcontinent.

Indian feminist literature has long provided a compelling platform for the articulation of women's

voices, especially those negotiating the tensions between traditional expectations and modern aspirations. Writers such as Shashi Deshpande have explored themes of gender discrimination, patriarchy, identity, and psychological conflict through the lives of middle-class, educated Indian women. Her novels—*The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *Roots and Shadows*, and *That Long Silence*—examine the inner and outer lives of women seeking autonomy amidst restrictive societal norms (Behtash & Sajjadi, 2012). Alongside Deshpande, authors like Anita Desai, Kamala Das, Arundhati Roy, and Mahasweta Devi have also expanded the feminist discourse in India. While Desai explores emotional repression and domestic solitude, Das challenges taboos around female desire and identity (Behtash & Sajjadi, 2012). Roy critiques caste and gender oppression through a political lens, while Devi portrays the systemic exploitation of tribal and marginalized women with gritty realism. Together, these writers have cultivated a literary tradition that confronts patriarchy and redefines female subjectivity.

Despite these feminist strides, gender-based violence and systemic oppression persist. Monika Bhatti's debut novel *Lives Not Lived* captures this enduring reality through the stories of Haree and Naina—women from two different generations shaped by patriarchal ideologies. Although set in contemporary times, Naina's life experiences reveal how women remain entrapped in deeply rooted structures of inequality. Bhatti's work sheds light on institutionalized gender-based violence, exposing how it undermines women's agency and perpetuates subjugation.

While Bhatti's novel resonates with themes explored by earlier feminist writers, it has received limited scholarly attention. This paper aims to contribute to the emerging discourse surrounding *Lives Not Lived* by offering a focused feminist analysis of Naina, its central female protagonist. Specifically, it investigates why Naina is unable to transcend the patriarchal constraints imposed upon her. To explore this, the study draws upon Kate Millett's (2016) foundational concept of patriarchy. Further, drawing on Sylvia Walby's (1990) theory of patriarchy, this paper analyses the mechanisms of control in Naina's life. In order to contextualize the analysis within the Indian socio-cultural context, the paper also engages with the works of Kamla Bhasin (2003) and Nivedita Menon (2004, 2012). By examining the ideological, psychological, and sexual forces of control that shape Naina's life—particularly through instances of coerced education, forced marriage, and sexual exploitation—this study seeks to illuminate the mechanisms through which patriarchy systematically limits female autonomy and resistance.

II. ANALYSIS

1. Absence of Agency and Autonomy

Monika Bhatti's *Lives not Lived* chronicles the lack of agency, autonomy, and freedom in Naina's life, illustrating how patriarchal structures dictate her existence and suppress her individuality. The novel underscores the deeply ingrained societal norms that deprive Naina of self-determination. As Millett (2016) explains, "Sexual politics obtains consent through the socialization of both sexes to basic patriarchal politics with regard to temperament, role and status" (p. 26). This disparity eventually leads to a prejudice of deeming men as superior and women inferior. Patriarchy, in this context, functions to reinforce male dominance by shaping women's roles according to societal expectations. Women are systematically denied the privileges afforded to men, including access to essential resources such as quality education, services, and opportunities (Bhasin, 2003, p. 28). Similarly, Naina is

placed in a position of disadvantage, wherein her freedom to make independent decisions are severely restricted.

One of the pivotal moments in the novel that illustrates the restrictions imposed on Naina's autonomy begins with the restriction of her educational choices. Rather than being allowed to pursue a field that aligns with her passions and aspirations, the male figures in her family collectively impose an undergraduate degree upon her, disregarding her personal interests. "They decided what her career should be and all her forms for college were filled out by her brother" (Bhatti, 2023, p. 28). This decision exemplifies the systemic control exerted over women's lives, where their ambitions are subordinated to the expectations and dictates of male authority figures. When Naina expresses her desire to pursue a degree in business administration, her uncle dismisses her aspirations with mockery, deeming her intellectually unfit for a career in business because she is a woman. This response reflects a broader ideological framework described by Kate Millett (2016), where she critiques the notion of a "temperamental imbalance of personality traits between the sexes" (p. 42). She argues that such gendered assumptions lead to a rigid division between 'masculine' and 'feminine' domains of knowledge, with women often relegated to the humanities or social sciences, while men are privileged in fields such as science, technology, and business.

Naina's lack of agency is not limited to her educational pursuits but extends into her personal relationships as well. After being seen with a male classmate, she is subjected to both physical punishment and verbal shaming. A family member remarks, "See, that's what happens when you let them go. They go and sleep around with boys" (Bhatti, 2023, p. 253). As a consequence, her remaining freedom is further curtailed—she is prohibited from attending college, and her family begins arranging her marriage into a wealthy household despite her vehement refusal. This reaction reflects a social system that polices female behaviour with strict moral codes, where any form of interaction with the opposite sex is perceived as a threat to the family's honour. Kate Millett (2016) critiques this dynamic, noting that "the large quantity of guilt attached to sexuality in patriarchy is overwhelmingly placed upon the female, who is, culturally speaking, held to be the more culpable party in nearly any sexual liaison" (p. 54). This notion is clearly echoed in the narrative when Naina's uncle states, "That's why people don't want daughters. They bring shame if you allow them to study. If you free them" (Bhatti, 2023, p. 264). This statement reflects how patriarchal structures prioritize social conformity and honour over a woman's aspirations

or well-being, reinforcing gender bias and expectations through control.

Moreover, Naina's existence is characterized by relentless surveillance, reinforcing the pervasive patriarchal control imposed upon her. She is consistently denied the freedom to move independently, requiring a male chaperone for even the most basic interactions. As the narrator states, "She had never been allowed to deal with outsiders...Naina was used to moving through the burrow of life, holding the hands of males" (Bhatti, 2023, p. 28). This practice reflects a deep-rooted mistrust of women's autonomy, grounded in the patriarchal belief that female behaviour must be closely monitored to prevent any perceived deviation from social norms. Bhasin (2003) in her analysis of patriarchal structures, addresses this dynamic directly, asserting that one of the primary areas over which men exert control is women's mobility (p. 9). By restricting their movement through surveillance or social constraints, patriarchy effectively maintains control over women's sexuality and independence (Bhasin, 2003, p. 9). In Naina's case, such limitations severely restrict her ability to engage with the world on her own terms, reducing her to a passive subject within a rigid system of gendered power. These mechanisms of surveillance not only curb her physical mobility but also instil a lasting sense of powerlessness, as her capacity to make decisions without male oversight is denied.

Through Naina's experiences, the novel lays bare the multifaceted ways in which patriarchy disciplines women—limiting their access to education, suppressing their sexuality, and reducing their existence to compliance and subservience. Such impositions not only stifle intellectual growth but also reinforce the notion that a woman's role is to conform rather than to carve out her own path. Moreover, the act of forced marriage not only erases Naina's right to choose her life partner but also exemplifies how women's lives are often dictated by concerns of reputation and societal approval rather than their own desires. *Lives not Lived* emphasizes how patriarchy operates through both ideological conditioning and direct coercion to preserve male dominance. Therefore, Naina's life becomes a powerful site for examining the gendered dynamics of power, where her choices are overridden, her movements monitored, and her individuality stifled.

2. Exploitation and its Consequences

In *Lives Not Lived*, the exploitation that Naina endures serves as a powerful representation of patriarchal control, where systemic oppression manifests through sexual violence, coercion, and deep psychological trauma. Her experiences, when situated within the broader

discourse on patriarchy, reveal that her victimization is not an isolated event but a symptomatic outcome of deeply entrenched structures of gendered domination. Millett (2016) asserts that "patriarchal force relies on a form of violence particularly sexual in character and realized most completely in the act of rape" (p. 44). This articulation underscores how sexual violence becomes a tool through which male authority asserts control over female autonomy. Naina's assault and subsequent suffering exemplify this dynamic, as her autonomy is violently subjugated through acts intended to silence and dominate her. Similarly, Susan Brownmiller (1975) contends that rape functions as "a man's basic weapon of force against woman, the principal agent of his will and her fear" (p. 14). This assertion finds resonance in *Lives Not Lived*, where Naina is subjected to sexual violence precisely as a means of control, leaving her to grapple with its enduring psychological consequences. The novel, thus, not only depicts the brutality of individual acts but also exposes the systemic nature of such violence within patriarchal frameworks.

A pivotal moment in *Lives Not Lived* is the childhood sexual assault that Naina endures at the hands of Ashok, a middle-aged man who manipulates his position of authority and maturity under the pretence of affection. This traumatic event reveals the deeply rooted sexual perversion, commodification of women's bodies, and the pervasive culture of victim shaming. Ashok exploits Naina's innocence, offering her toffees in exchange for sexual gratification, thereby highlighting the predatory behaviour cloaked in seemingly benign gestures. Reflecting on the incident, Naina recalls that she "had entered into a world...where every girl is treated like a piece of meat, a world where she was being preyed upon" (Bhatti, 2023, p. 282). This notion of commodification aligns with the critique in *Seeing Like a Feminist*, where she argues that women's bodies are persistently sexualised and objectified to serve male desire (Menon, 2012, p. 199). Subsequently, the perpetrator, Ashok, attempts to deflect responsibility for his actions by shifting the blame onto Naina, asking, "Tell me, why did you show me your breasts when you did not want this?" (Bhatti, 2023, p. 290). This instance exemplifies the culture of victim-blaming, wherein the burden of the assault is unjustly placed on the victim rather than the perpetrator. Brownmiller (1975) critiques this tendency, asserting that "the popularity of the belief that a woman 'cock-teases' a man into rape, or precipitates a rape by incautious behaviour, is part of the smoke screen that men throw up to obscure their actions" (p. 312). Ashok's response reflects this very rhetoric, as he manipulates patriarchal narratives to justify his abuse and maintain control over

Naina, a child rendered powerless by both her age and authority.

Beyond the physical violation she experiences, Naina is also subjected to psychological and sexual manipulation by her boyfriend, Veer, who coerces her into believing that sexual compliance is a necessary condition for love and emotional commitment within a relationship. For Naina, sex becomes an “obvious process that passionate lovers go through”, despite her own lack of desire or readiness (Bhatti, 2023, p. 216). The narrator reveals her internal conflict: “She didn’t know why she let that happen, why she couldn’t say ‘No’ to him” (Bhatti, 2023, p. 222). Veer manipulates Naina, using emotional coercion to guilt her into sexual acts, asserting, “No, you don’t love me! Otherwise, you wouldn’t have stopped me. You don’t trust me” (Bhatti, 2023, p. 221). This form of emotional blackmail illustrates how patriarchal norms dictate women’s sexual availability as a measure of their love and loyalty. Bhasin (2003), in *What is Patriarchy?*, asserts that patriarchy seeks to regulate women’s sexuality, rendering them subordinate and “obliged to provide sexual pleasures to men according to their needs and desires” (p. 8). Veer’s treatment of Naina aligns with Sylvia Walby’s (1990) observation that men in heterosexual relationships frequently “sexually objectify women, reducing them to mere sexual objects” (p. 118). While Naina does not explicitly label her experience with Veer as rape, the absence of clear, enthusiastic consent positions the encounter within the realm of what appears to be dubious one. Menon (2004) notes that, “if consent is established, the act is considered legitimate”, yet the coercive circumstances surrounding Naina’s decision problematize any assumption of genuine consent (p. 126). Her consent is not freely given, but rather extracted through manipulation—revealing how emotional coercion operates as a subtle yet insidious form of patriarchal control. This dynamic underscores the gendered power imbalance that enables men to assert dominance in intimate relationships by framing women’s sexual submission as a requisite for love and loyalty.

The long-term consequences of Naina’s exploitation manifest primarily in the form of deep psychological trauma, marked by self-loathing, anxiety, and physical manifestations of distress. In the aftermath of her assault, Naina engages in compulsive acts—brushing her tongue and scrubbing her skin until it is sore—suggesting an attempt to cleanse herself of the violation. Her unresolved trauma is further evident in her responses to intimacy, as the narrator observes: “whenever Veer tried to come close to her, her body unconsciously repelled his touch. The panic would start to rush in her body whenever he came close” (Bhatti, 2023, p. 172). Naina’s experiences

culminate in nervous breakdowns, panic attacks, and recurring nightmares, highlighting the enduring psychological toll of sexual violence. Brownmiller (1975) asserts that sexual assault leaves “lasting psychological effects on all women” who have been subjected to such violence (p. 377). Menon (2012) elaborates on the socio-cultural explanation of this trauma, explaining why rape is often perceived as “a fate worse than death” (p. 159). According to Menon (2012), the pain and shame experienced by survivors are exacerbated by societal attitudes that stigmatise victims rather than perpetrators (p. 160). She further argues that ‘sex,’ ‘sexual violence,’ and ‘sexuality’ occupy some of the most intimate and private spaces of an individual’s identity (p. 161). Thus, when sexual violence occurs, it unsettles not only the body but also the self, resulting in a profound disintegration of one’s sense of identity.

This disintegration is intensified by the patriarchal framework within which rape is situated—a framework that not only legitimises male dominance but also conditions women to internalise blame for their victimisation. Naina’s self-loathing can be understood within this context: she is not merely coping with the violation itself, but also with the emotional burden imposed by a society that expects women to carry the weight of their own subjugation. The psychological aftermath of sexual violence, therefore, is not solely a private struggle, but a reflection of deeply entrenched patriarchal ideologies that perpetuate cycles of trauma and silence.

Naina’s experiences illustrate the pervasive nature of patriarchal control, wherein male sexual entitlement is normalised and women’s bodies are positioned as objects of desire and domination. The asymmetry in age, experience, and power renders Naina particularly vulnerable, emphasizing how patriarchal structures exploit such imbalances to reinforce gendered subjugation. Her coercion by a manipulative partner exposes how patriarchy extends into the most intimate relationships, often disguising exploitation as affection. As Naina internalises the belief that love necessitates submission, her sexual autonomy is systematically undermined. The resulting alienation, anxiety, and psychological trauma results as an aftermath of the assault affirm patriarchy’s insidious ways of governing the ways women view their own worth. Naina’s story thus underscores the multifaceted impact of systemic gendered violence.

3. Burden of Gendered Societal Expectations

In the novel, Naina’s life is shaped by rigid societal expectations that enforce traditional gender roles, effectively restricting her autonomy. Bhasin (2003), in

Understanding Gender, iterates how gender roles are socially constructed and systematically assigned based on prevailing societal norms and expectations rather than biological determinants (p. 32). Consequently, women are often relegated domestic responsibilities such as caregiving and household management, while men are encouraged to pursue education, professional advancement, and public engagement. These socially and culturally imposed roles result in a gendered distribution of power and privilege, wherein women typically enjoy fewer rights and resources than men (Bhasin, 2003, p. 5). This imbalance is clearly reflected in the treatment Naina receives from her family. In her case, patriarchy functions as a force of oppression, limiting her opportunities in both public and private spheres.

Naina's experiences exemplify this systemic oppression, as she is burdened with household responsibilities that impede her academic and social pursuits. This restriction is indicative of how domestic labour is often disproportionately assigned to women, reinforcing their subordination and preventing them from engaging in activities that could foster personal growth. Naina expresses resentment over being compelled to undertake domestic chores while her male friends engaged in leisure activities. From an early age, she was conditioned to believe that "tasks of every married women and unmarried girls in the family were predicated..." (Bhatti, 2023, p. 52). This observation aligns with Menon's (2012) assertion that "women are responsible for housework... The labour that goes into making people capable of working day after day (food, clean clothes, rest) is provided by women" (p. 11). These gendered expectations also hinder Naina's participation in extracurricular activities during her college years, as the demands of domestic labour consume much of her time and energy. She frequently feels alienated among her peers, noting that while they discussed their hobbies and weekend courses. This sense of exclusion highlights the ways in which patriarchal constraints obstruct women's pursuit of individual aspirations, entrapping them in a vicious cycle of domesticity and subordination.

One of the primary ways in which Naina is constrained is through the imposition of household chores, which leaves her little time to engage in extracurricular activities at her college. Kate Millett (2016) discusses how patriarchal systems create and sustain power imbalances by relegating women to domestic roles. Naina's forced prioritization of household duties over her education is a manifestation of this dynamic, wherein domestic labour is considered an intrinsic aspect of female identity. This expectation inhibits her ability to cultivate skills and networks that could contribute to her personal and

professional development. Furthermore, this aligns with Nivedita Menon's (2012) argument in *Seeing Like a Feminist*, where she critiques how the societal division of labour naturalizes the idea that women must shoulder unpaid domestic work while men are encouraged to pursue external achievements. Naina's lack of agency in choosing how she spends her time underscores the structural constraints that limit women's participation in broader spheres of life.

In addition to being restricted by household responsibilities, Naina faces the moral obligation to uphold her family's reputation—a burden disproportionately placed on women within patriarchal societies. This gendered responsibility is made explicit when her father admonishes her: "Always remember that a girl carries the weight of name and reputation of her family on her shoulders. I am trusting you with it. Keep it safe" (Bhatti, 2023, p. 93). Menon (2012) also asserts how this gender-appropriate behaviour is inevitably placed on women, where their morality and virtue are policed to ensure the reputation of the family (p. 4). She claims, "The institution that manages this policing is the patriarchal heterosexual family. The family as it exists is the core that sustains the social order" (p. 4). This policing and moral surveillance permeates all aspects of Naina's life, manifesting in restrictions on her social interactions, prohibition against attending parties, and limiting even the necessary communication with male peers. The psychological toll of such restrictions becomes evident when Naina reflects, "All her excitement had evaporated. Suddenly, college felt like a battlefield, where she will have to fight hard to save her family's honour" (Bhatti, 2023, p. 93). This encapsulates the control exerted in patriarchal society, wherein, unlike their male counterparts, women aren't allowed the freedom to navigate their life on their own terms without the constant imposition of familial expectations.

Moreover, Naina is subjected to societal pressure to dress modestly and adopt the comportment traditionally associated with being a 'good girl'. This control over female bodies and appearance is a fundamental aspect of patriarchal regulation. Millett (2016) identifies traits such as "passivity, ignorance, docility, virtue and ineffectuality" as those historically idealised in women (p. 26). Bhasin (2003) situates this within the Indian context, noting that women are subjected to prescriptive expectations regarding both behaviour and appearance: "The mode of dress can and does influence...the dignity of people" (p. 6). Women are also expected to be kind, gentle, nurturing, and obedient—qualities Naina's family demands of her. Her father instructs, "Girls should be silent like an ant, which works hard the whole day without disturbing

anybody” (Bhatti, 2023, p. 92). As a result, Naina is expected to dress conservatively, wrap a *dupatta* across her chest, lower her gaze while speaking to men, and even refrain from wearing kohl under her eyes. These behavioural codes are not merely familial expectations but broader societal impositions on women's autonomy. The narrator notes that Naina's boyfriend, Veer, is drawn to her because she is soft-spoken and dresses traditionally, reinforcing the notion that female desirability depends on submission. However, Naina questions these norms: “Naina never understood these reasons... How can wearing jeans and having a phone decide the character of the girl” (Bhatti, 2023, p. 149). Although she does not openly resist, the narrative highlights how such expectations suppress individuality and agency. Patriarchal systems thrive on the internalisation of these codes, which facilitate the continued subjugation of women under the guise of virtue and propriety.

Therefore, Naina's obligation to conform to an ideal of righteousness is emblematic of the ways in which women's behaviours are closely scrutinised and regulated under patriarchal norms. In Naina's case, this ideal manifests through expectations that she must embody virtue, dress modestly, behave with restraint, and dutifully perform household responsibilities. These demands are not presented as personal choices but as moral obligations tied to her family's honour, which the male members of her family remain exempt from. Through these instances, the novel highlights how Naina's agency is curtailed by patriarchal norms that impose rigid gender roles. Such scrutiny reflects the broader structures that police women's conduct and restrict their freedom.

III. CONCLUSION

Bhatti's *Lives Not Lived* offers a compelling critique of patriarchal oppression, illustrating how systemic control governs women's autonomy and agency. Through Naina's experiences—ranging from coerced education and forced marriage to sexual exploitation and domestic subjugation—the novel exposes the pervasiveness of gendered constraints. Bhatti highlights how patriarchy functions through both overt acts of violence and insidious mechanisms of control that shape women's identities and limit their freedoms. However, while the paper analyses the impacts of such oppression, its scope remains primarily focused on the experiences of just one female character in the novel. Broader intersections of caste or class as depicted through Haree's character remain largely unexplored. Nonetheless, *Lives Not Lived* powerfully represents Naina's lack of agency not as an isolated instance but as emblematic of a deeply entrenched system that polices behaviour, restricts

mobility, and conditions women to internalize their subjugation.

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